

Empathic Accuracy and Observed Demand Behavior in Couples

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Introduction

Disagreements and conflicts are inevitable in intimate relationships because each partner has his or her own expectations, goals, values and perspectives (Lewin, 1948). How partners behave, think, and feel during relationship conflict has been an important topic of psychological investigation for many decades (see Bradbury & Karney, 2014 for an overview). The current data-report extends existing research on this matter by providing data from a large-scale observational study on partners' empathic accuracy and demand behavior during conflict interactions.

Empathic accuracy in couples is defined as the extent to which partners understand each other's unspoken thoughts or feelings as they spontaneously occur during the course of their everyday interactions (Ickes, 1993, p. 588). Although empathic accuracy refers to one's understanding of the inner world of the other, which is a difficult process to operationalize, Ickes and colleagues (Ickes et al., 1990) succeeded in developing a paradigm (i.e., the unstructured dyadic interaction paradigm) to measure the interaction partners' levels of empathic accuracy in an objective but naturalistic manner. Within this paradigm, the perceiver's level of empathic accuracy is determined by coding the degree of similarity between the target's reported thoughts/feelings during an interaction and the perceiver's inferences about each of the target's thoughts/feelings.

This paradigm has been frequently used in studies on the role of motivation in partners' level of empathic (in)accuracy. The results of these studies have provided considerable evidence that different forms of motivation—either stable long-term motives or more transient, situational-specific motives—play an important role in the perceiver's level of empathic accuracy (Ickes, 2011). This motivation may be relationship-promoting, in that a certain level of accurate insight into each other is needed when partners want to effectively coordinate their individual and shared actions (e.g., in providing adequate support, Verhofstadt et al., 2011; in reinforcing perceived closeness, Simpson et al., 2003; in accommodating behavior during relationship conflict, Bates & Samp, 2011; Kilpatrick et al., 2002). Motivation that stimulates the intention to be accurate may also stem from individual characteristics, such as being encouraged to comply with gender-role stereotypes (i.e., according to which women are more empathic; Ickes et al., 2000), or partners experiencing a sense of distrust reflected in an anxious attachment style (Dugosh, 2001).

On the other hand, there is also evidence that partners can be motivated to be *less* accurate when doing so helps to protect their relationship (Ickes & Simpson, 1997 & 2001). Specifically, individuals are motivated to be less accurate when the partner is likely to be harboring thoughts and feelings which—if accurately inferred—would have a distressing and destabilizing effect on their relationship (e.g., Simpson et al., 1995; Simpson et al., 2003). As Smith, Ickes, Hall, and Hodges (2014) have noted, intimate partners are capable of “managing” their empathic accuracy, dialing it up or down depending on the demands of the situation or their own motivations.

Although relationship conflict can be perceived as a threatening or stressing event, it can also be viewed as an opportunity to reconcile partners' different goals or opinions, to expose personal needs or desires, or to express concern about the partners' inappropriate behavior or the current status of the relationship. By raising a certain topic of disagreement, partners generally want to change the status quo of the relationship or to induce a certain change in their partner's opinion or behavior (Eldridge & Christensen, 2002). In the literature, this partner is referred to as the conflict initiator or the agent of change (e.g., Christensen & Pasch, 1993). This conflict initiating partner often relies on *demanding communication*, which is defined as the tendency to demand change in a critical and blaming manner, for example, by nagging, complaining, criticizing or “pressing” the other. The other partner may react by withdrawing,

1 reflected in avoiding the other partner or by terminating or escaping from the conflict
2 (Christensen, 1988).

3 A certain level of demand-withdraw behavior is commonly observed during conflict
4 interactions, even in satisfied couples (Baucom et al., 2010; Eldridge et al., 2007). However, a
5 polarized pattern of demand-withdraw behavior can be associated with relationship distress,
6 power differences—and even violence—within the relationship (Sagrestano, Heavey, &
7 Christensen, 1999), as well as with relationship dissatisfaction in the long-term (Eldridge &
8 Christensen, 2002). Although some studies have reported a tendency for women to take the
9 demanding role and men the withdrawing role (Christensen, 1988; Eldridge & Christensen,
10 2002), other studies suggest that the role of initiating a disagreement or the conflict topic *per*
11 *se* is more predictive of being in the demander role than is gender (Christensen & Heavey, 1990;
12 Eldridge, et al., 2007; Heavey et al., 1993).

13 Consistent with the empirical evidence described above, we expect that a partner who
14 desires change on a particular topic is likely to initiate a discussion and to behave in a way that
15 allows him/her to bring about this desired change (i.e., by demanding). This same individual
16 might also be motivated to accurately infer the partner's current thoughts and feelings about
17 issue(s) at the heart of the conflict. Why? Because accurate insight into the thoughts and feelings
18 of the partner during conflict might enable one to know what kinds of reactions to anticipate
19 and which “buttons to push” in order to convince or change the partner.

20 A study by Hinnekens et al. (2015) was the first to examine the question of whether
21 intimate partners who are highly motivated to induce change in their partner during conflicts
22 will be more empathically accurate than partners who are less motivated to do so. The results
23 of this study suggested that some forms of demand behavior are indeed associated with the level
24 of empathic accuracy during a conflict interaction, thereby confirming the assumption that
25 perceivers who are motivated to induce changes in their partner or the relationship are also
26 motivated to accurately infer their partner's minds in ways that enable them to exert more
27 influence on their partner and eventually 'push' the partner towards the desired outcome.

28 The current dataset includes empathic accuracy and demand behavior data from the 310
29 partners of 155 couples who were observed during conflict interactions. It contributes to
30 existing research by providing data from (a) a large sample of couples, (b) in a committed long-
31 term relationship, and (c) it provides measures of their empathic accuracy for their partner's
32 thoughts and feelings separately. It therefore enables researchers to further explore the
33 associations between empathic accuracy and observed demand behavior, as well as potential
34 moderators of this association (e.g., gender, age, relationship duration, relationship
35 satisfaction).

36 **Materials and Method**

37 **Ethics statement**

38 The study was approved by the ethical committee of the Faculty of Psychology and
39 Educational Sciences of Ghent University, Belgium.

40 **Participants**

41 The sample consisted of the 310 members of 155 cohabiting/married heterosexual
42 couples. The sample was recruited in the context of the “UGhent Family Lab Couple Study”, a
43 large observational study over a period of one year, between 2014 and 2015. The recruitment
44 strategy enlisted couples to volunteer for the study through posters and social media notices on
45 the one hand and by masters'-level students in clinical psychology recruiting couples in their
46 own vicinity on the other hand.

Couples who expressed an interest in participating were contacted by the first author, informed in general terms about the project, and evaluated to determine whether they met the inclusion criteria (i.e., being involved in their current intimate relationship for at least one year and being married/(partially) cohabiting for at least six months). Inadequate knowledge of the Dutch language and being members of same-sex couples were used as exclusion criteria. Each couple received a monetary compensation of 20€ for completing the questionnaire session and an additional 20€ for participating in the observational part of study. Participants could withdraw from the investigation at any time and without giving any reason for their withdrawal.

The first set of measures on the online questionnaire were demographic items. The responses to these items revealed that the average reported relationship length was 12.15 years ($SD = 11.76$). The respondents' average age was 36.30 years for the men ($SD = 14.05$) and 34.21 years for the women ($SD = 13.60$), with a range of 19 to 76 years.

Procedure

After providing written informed consent, the partners in each couple independently completed an internet survey. Each partner was asked to fill out this questionnaire at home in advance of the second appointment and this at their own pace, as the questionnaire could be interrupted and resumed. The questions addressed both individual—e.g., attachment style (ECR-S; Wei, Russell, Mallinckrodt, & Vogel, 2007), gender identity (BSRI; Bem, 1981), general wellbeing (SHS; Lyubomirsky, & Lepper, 1999; SVS; Bostic, Rubio, & Hood, 2000)—and relationship functioning—e.g., dyadic adjustment (DAS, Spanier, 1976), communication patterns (CPQ; Christensen, 1988), dyadic coping (DCI, Bodenmann, 2008) (more detailed information is available by e-mail request). The questionnaires that are relevant to the current dataset are discussed in greater detail below. Couples who completed the questionnaires were then scheduled to attend a laboratory session in which they participated in an 11-minute videotaped conflict interaction task that was followed by a post-interaction video review task. At the end of their participation, the couples were fully debriefed.

Materials

Quality of Marriage Index

Relationship satisfaction was assessed with the Quality of Marriage Index (QMI, Norton, 1983). This questionnaire consists of 6 items assessing global relationship satisfaction (e.g., “My relationship with my partner is very stable”). The first five items are rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *very strong disagreement* to 7 = *very strong agreement*) and the last item is rated on a 10-point Likert scale (1 = *very unhappy* to 10 = *perfectly happy*). The total score, which could range from 6 to 45 with higher scores indicating higher levels of satisfaction, was obtained by summing the scores of all the individual items. The internal consistency of the QMI was high in this sample (Cronbach's $\alpha = .94$ for both men and women).

The conflict interaction task

In the observational part of the study, the couples were invited to participate in a conflict interaction task that was similar to those used in previous studies of relationship conflict (e.g., Fletcher & Thomas, 2000; Verhofstadt et al., 2005). The couples were escorted into a laboratory that was furnished as a living room and was equipped so that the partners' interaction could be video-recorded with their prior knowledge. Both partners granted their permission for this recording by means of a written consent form.

1 In advance of their conflict discussion, the partners were separately asked to select a
2 problem or issue from a list of common conflict topics in intimate relationships of which the
3 source was either the partner or the relationship and which caused relationship distress or
4 recurring disagreement. The topics (e.g., trust, intimacy, finances) were derived from previous
5 work on sources of conflict within intimate relationships (Kurdek, 1994).

6 After this problem selection had occurred, the partners were randomly assigned to one
7 of two conditions: *initiator* or *not initiator*. Operationally, this variable meant that the conflict
8 issue which the designated initiator had selected was the one that the partners would discuss
9 during their upcoming video-recorded interaction.¹ The initiator in each dyad was instructed to
10 introduce the issue to the other partner so that they could discuss this problem together for 11
11 minutes. Both partners were instructed to act as much as possible as they would at home when
12 discussing a similar problem with each other.

13 14 **Video review task** 15

16 Immediately after the 11-minute conflict interaction, both partners completed a video
17 review task similar to that used in previous studies of empathic accuracy (e.g., Verhofstadt et
18 al, 2005; Verhofstadt et al, 2016). The partners were seated in separate locations and asked to
19 re-experience their interaction while they each viewed a video of their interaction on a laptop
20 computer. The video presentation was controlled by an interactive software package
21 specifically developed for the current study in order to facilitate the data collection (Hinneken
22 & Kimpe, 2014; more information is available by e-mail request).

23 Every 90 seconds, the video was paused and the same set of instructions appeared on
24 the screen. First, each partner was asked to type the specific thought and feeling that s/he had
25 at that point in the interaction in a blank box that appeared in the context of an online
26 questionnaire (this questionnaire included additional multiple choice items that are not relevant
27 to the current data set, however these items may have influenced the open-end questions)².
28 Second, each member of the couple was asked to infer the specific content of each of their
29 partner's thoughts and feelings, and to type each of these inferences in the blank boxes that
30 appeared on the online questionnaire (followed by parallel multiple choice items)³.

31 The instructions for all of these questions emphasized that the answer should be based
32 on the 10-second interaction interval that immediately preceded the tape stop. To help ensure
33 that both partners based their answers on the same 10-second time interval, our custom software
34 program gave the participants the option to re-observe the 10-second interval that occurred right
35 before the tape stop.

36 37 **Empathic accuracy coding** 38

39 There was a pool of eleven trained, independent judges, and each subsample of the
40 dataset was rated by four of them. They rated the degree of similarity between the content of

¹ The topic selected by the partner who was randomly designated as not initiator was not discussed during the couple's videotaped conflict interaction.

² The following additional multiple choice items were asked during the first part of the video review task: to (1) rate how obviously they believed their expression of the reported thoughts and feelings was in their behavior at the time; and (2) rate how threatening they perceived the content of their thoughts and feelings to be to themselves, to their partner, and to their relationship.

³ The following parallel multiple choice items were asked during the second part of the video review task: to (1) rate how obviously they believed their partner expressed each thought or feeling in his or her behavior at the time; and (2) rate how threatening each of their partner's inferred thoughts and feelings were towards themselves, for their partner, and for their relationship.

each actual thought or feeling that one partner recorded and the content of the corresponding inferred thought or feeling that the other partner recorded. Following the recommendations of Ickes and colleagues (1990), the degree of similarity was in each case rated using a 3-point scale on which 0 = *different content from the actual thought or feeling*; 1 = *similar, but not the same, content as the actual thought or feeling* and 2 = *essentially the same content as the actual thought or feeling*. Overall empathic accuracy scores were then computed as a simple percentage measure of the number of “accuracy points” earned divided by the total number of “accuracy points” possible and multiplied by 100.⁴ These scores were computed separately for the set of inferred thoughts and for the set of inferred feelings so that each partner received an empathic accuracy score for thoughts and for feelings separately.

The average empathic accuracy scores for the inferred thoughts and the inferred feelings and the intraclass correlations are shown in table 1.

Conflict Interaction Rating System

The behaviors observed in this study were rated and analyzed using the Couples Interaction Rating System (CIRS; Heavey et al., 1998). There was a pool of six trained coders, and each subsample of the dataset was rated by three of them. They rated the observed behaviors on the following two dimensions of demand behavior: (1) blame (i.e., accusations, criticism and assignment of the partner as the causal agent for the problem), and (2) pressure for change (i.e., positive/negative and implicit/explicit pressure for change in the partner). Both dimensions were rated on a 9-point Likert scale. High interrater reliabilities were achieved for the coders’ ratings of both scale dimensions (see table 1). Because of the high levels of interrater reliability, the behavioral ratings were averaged across the three raters.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of the Study Variables

	Men				Women			
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range	ICC	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range	ICC
QMI	39.56	5.36	10-45		40.11	4.96	14-45	
EA thoughts	20.33%	11.70	0-55	.67	19.27%	11.66	0-48	.67
EA feelings	21.29%	12.15	0-68	.70	21.56%	12.23	0-52	.74
Blame	2.17	1.42	1-8.67	.75	2.52	1.73	1-7.67	.77
Pressure for change	3.15	1.65	1-8.67	.71	4.04	2.08	1-9	.77

⁴ The theoretical range of this percent-correct accuracy measure was 0 (none of the possible accuracy points was earned) to 100 (all of the possible accuracy points were earned).

1 **Dataset description**

2 The data discussed in this manuscript have been deposited in FigShare and is accessible
3 through the following hyperlink <https://figshare.com/s/1dd9ca870d12284ddfb6> under the name
4 ‘Empathic Accuracy and Observed Demand Behavior in Couples’. The deposit contains four
5 files: (1) a .sav file, a .csv file and a .txt file containing all the raw and processed data (general
6 information, item and total scores of the relationship satisfaction questionnaire, and raw and
7 total scores resulting from the coding of the CIRS and empathic accuracy); and (2) a .docx file
8 containing some additional information about the variables in the data file.

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